

NSF: forum or brand name? Between magic figures and slogans

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«I want to assure you that the block that is being formed today, the pre-election block, will be one of the most powerful forces at the parliamentary elections,» Yulia Tymoshenko, leader of the Batkivshchyna and vehement critic of President Leonid Kuchma stated on July 10, when announcing the establishment of a political entity bearing a well-known name of the National Salvation Forum (NSF).

On the last day of Leonid Kuchma's seventh year in power, seven political parties – the Batkivshchyna, Anatoly Matvienko's Sobor, the Ukrainian Republican Party, the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party (not to be mixed with the Medvedchuk-Surkis Social Democratic Party (United)), the Ukrainian Christian Democratic Party, the Conservative Republican Party, and the Patriotic Party (the latter two known only by names of their leaders, Stepan Khmara and Mykola Gaber, respectively) – announced their decision to join forces in the bid for seats in the parliament.

Yulia Tymoshenko, elected to lead the new block, announced its key objective as «cleaning the society from anything dirty», reforming the information sphere, the political system, and introducing civilized diffusion of authority between the branches of power.

The coverage of the event by selected Ukrainian media reflects the attitude of some other political forces and vested interests to Yulia Tymoshenko's new block. For instance, the INTER TV channel, dominated by interests of the Social Democratic Party (United), announced that «the former head of the UESU corporation has finally privatized the name of the National Salvation Forum» (Podrobnosti, July 10, 2001). The UESU stands for the «United Energy Systems of Ukraine», a former monopolist gas trader closely linked to then Prime Minister of Ukraine Pavlo Lazarenko.

Paradoxically, similar interpretation of the establishment of the block was given by the co-thinkers. One of the coordinators of the «Ukraine without Kuchma», NSF activist Volodymyr Chemerys announced in an interview to the STB TV channel that the establishment of the pre-election block «means that the National Salvation Forum passed on its brand for the election campaign of a block led by the Batkivshchyna, led by Yulia Tymoshenko.» «I regret to note that the phenomenon of the Ukrainian opposition that existed in winter, when the left and the right acted together, unfortunately, that phenomenon was not the kind to work in the elections» (STB, Vikna, June 10, 2001).

Hence, as the date of the 2002 parliamentary elections draws near, the Public Initiative «National Salvation Forum» is undergoing increasingly deep transformation. The NSF was initiated on February 9, 2001 and expected by its founders to become a parliamentary branch of the Ukraine without Kuchma actions. Then the initiative was joined by members of the Ukrainian parliament and well-known politicians. The Ukrainska Pravda wrote on February 9, 2001, that the opposition planned to «unite about 70 Ukrainian prominent opposition politicians». Yet, a noticeably smaller number of participants did not stop the founders from launching the NSF.

In February 2001 the NSF approved a manifesto that defined a strategic goal of the new movement as «putting an end to the criminal regime, establish truth and law, and turn Ukraine back to the European way of development.» It also specified the political route by which the strategic goal was supposed to be achieved: a need for «a change of the current system of power in Ukraine by means of holding large-scale actions «Ukraine without Kuchma», law-making activity in the parliament of Ukraine as well as using foreign political levers to influence the political situation in Ukraine» (www.korespondent.net, February 9, 2001). The first session of the new Forum was chaired by Taras Chornovil, MP, who had just left the faction of the People's Rukh of Ukraine and joined the Reforms-Congress faction. He also announced the specific tactical objective of the opposition formation: «a velvet revolution in Ukraine».

Other participants of the peculiar political «roundtable» were unusually eager to agree to the stated

goals. Leader of the Socialist Party Oleksandr Moroz announced Ukraine should have been transformed into a parliamentary-presidential or a purely parliamentary republic and Leonid Kuchma should have been removed from power. Moroz called on all participants of the new entity to support the «Ukraine without Kuchma» action and ensure legal provisions for them by means of amending the Constitution, pushing relevant pieces of legislation and ensuring the influence of the international community on the processes through diplomatic channels. Yulia Tymoshenko, in her turn, defined the key task of the new formation as «giving the people a hope for change for the better and building a democratic state.»

An important point of the establishment of the NSF, the issue of leadership, was then cautiously bypassed by the participants. Instead, they approved a 15-strong Council for coordinating the NSF's activities. Members of the Council included leader of the Socialist Party Oleksandr Moroz, Serhiy Holovaty, MP, leader of the Sobor party Anatoly Matvienko, mayor of Cherkasy Volodymyr Oliynyk, leaders of the Batkivshchyna Yulia Tymoshenko and Oleksandr Turchynov, member of the Rukh and the Reforms-Congress faction Taras Chornovil, Volodymyr Chemerys, leader of the Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party Stepan Khmara.

The lack of a single leader was both a strength and a weakness of the NSF. For a while it had been expected that Ukraine's Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko would take up the leadership of the opposition, but he chose not to take the offer. Yushchenko's reluctance to «adopt» the opposition could be explained by a variety of factors – from the remarkable ideological diversity of the opposition to some controversial points of the protest actions. Later on, after his dismissal by the parliament's no-confidence vote, Yushchenko said in an interview: «I respect the opposition politics, understand its roots. In the Ukrainian opposition there are a number of figures that will shape the future of Ukraine. ... but I look at the recent Polish, Czech history, I note the political decisions that have produced results in those countries in the form of the growth economy, good social standards... The [Polish] Solidarity, in order to carry out its policy in the parliament, had to receive 40 percent of the vote in the elections... What do we want? If we want to get 10-20 percent of the vote in the elections with our block, that is far from enough» (Ukraina Moloda, July 4, 2001). In the quoted case Yushchenko was not speaking about individuals, but about the opposition movement as such. While remaining a general «good friend» of the Ukrainian opposition, Yushchenko is rather skeptical about its chances to do well enough in the forthcoming elections to gain the «control package» of shares in the new parliament and, therefore, be able to form an effective consolidated parliamentary majority that would have shared political ideas and a clear agenda.

Apparently, for Yushchenko the decision not to join the NSF and/or individual formations of its leaders has been motivated not only by the NSF's troubled political identification, but by its electoral potential. Nowadays, the tendency becomes increasingly demonstrative.

Notwithstanding the declared collegiality of the formation, from the very start of the NSF Yulia Tymoshenko played the lead violin in it. Similarly, talks about establishment of an election block based on the NSF hate back to the Forum's very first days. However, in this case one may agree with Volodymyr Chemerys: the NSF block used the brand name rather than the formation itself, as a number of its «founding fathers» are going to compete for seats in the Rada as members of other political forces. Even Yuri Kostenko's Rukh, the Batkivshchyna's long-standing ally within the Ukrainska Pravdytsya inter-party association, did not respond to the NSF's and the Batkivshchyna's call. Yet, Kostenko himself played a gentleman when announcing publicly that he did not exclude cooperation of the right-wing block with the block of national democratic forces of the National Salvation Forum, noting that success might be achieved provided there was agreement on a joint position regarding the majoritarian constituencies.

The Rukhs, the Party of Reforms and Order and the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists have their own plans regarding the future election race. Taras Chornovil explicitly stated a thing that was not a secret for a long time: «if [we] have a union of right-wing forces, the Batkivshchyna's involvement in it will be rather problematic given several instances. Say, given the position of the two Rukhs, particularly the NRU [Udoenko] that have distanced themselves from Yulia Tymoshenko's austere opposition (Vysoky Zamok, July 6, 2001). Hence, it is still unclear what the reshuffles of the «political cards» will finally bring.

However, the short – so far - history of the NSF shows that it is not just «a thing in itself» build of

several political parties, but a modern version of the Jacobite club, focused primarily on personalities. A few months after the establishment of the NSF the initiative was skillfully taken by Yulia Tymoshenko, often described by observers as «the only man» in the previous government. It was Tymoshenko who voiced the NSF's key initiatives, primarily the call for a referendum on public trust to Leonid Kuchma. That initiative was viewed rather skeptically by her NSF colleagues – not because they objected against the chosen object of the referendum, but because of the technologies to be used and the judgment of the Constitutional Court that the issue of trust in the state power might not be a referendum question. While initially the decision was not seen as a waste of time and resources, the differences in approaches taken by members of the NSF have become increasingly obvious in the process of political and personal positioning.

Shortly before the establishment of the pre-election block, the media pointed out that «the NSF will be kept by Yulia [Tymoshenko], no doubt about that. Otherwise the Forum will transform into a fragile structure, an opposition «chajkhana», an oriental tea house where the leaders, just short of getting white china Asian-style tea-cups, will enjoy talking about daily strategy and tactics» (Vysokyi Zamok, July 6, 2001). «Preliminary proposals» to join were reportedly made to «the right-wing leaders of the opposition Taras Chornovil, Taras Stetskiy, as well as to one of the ideologists of the «For Truth!» action Markian Ivashchyn.» Yet, none of their reaction to the alleged invitation has been made public. Observers suggest waiting and seeing the official start of the race, when the election lists – unexpected as they may be – will be completed.

Meanwhile, the NSF Council (not to be mixed up with the NSF block) decided to form opposition-based «no-competition» election block. The news was announced by another «founding father» of the NSF, Oleksandr Moroz, who also said that «the NSF Council supported the initiative of the leader of the election block of national democratic forces – the National Salvation Forum – Yulia Tymoshenko to establish one of the opposition election blocks under the logo of the NSF» (Silski Visti, July 12, 2001). He went on to say that there would be another block, provisionally called «For Truth» and represented by members of the Ukrainian parliament Taras Chornovil or Taras Stetskiy, as well as an election block of the «Ukraine without Kuchma» which would be joined by the Socialist party. Again, he stressed the «no-competition» mantra of the opposition formation, arguing that all of them «stand for the change of the system of power in this state». According to Moroz, the pre-election cooperation between the opposition blocks will be expressed in the fact that «all of these blocks ... will agree on cooperation and coordination of efforts, particularly in some regions during campaigning for a specific candidate for a local office, and will not cross each other's path in the parliamentary elections.»

The Ukrainian Rukh leader Yuri Kostenko repeated the point: competition between the blocks will not be very acute because the NSF is overtly anti-presidential: «on this platform we will not be able to be in each other's way» (Silski Visti, July 12, 2001).

However, under any version of the election law a voter has only one vote to give for a political party or block, in which case the «no-competition» claims are destroyed by the reality. Obviously, the «no-competition» relations may be expressed in treating each other with respect, refraining from disclosing «compromat» against each other, and even agree not to have candidates running in the same majoritarian constituencies. However, as the electoral practice has shown, such agreements do not necessarily work. An example – probably not the best one, though – involves one of the present-day «non-competitors», Oleksandr Moroz. During the 1998 election campaign the Socialists and the Communist party had a similar deal, an agreement on common action. The first point of the agreement was the pledge that «at the election of the people's deputies of Ukraine, local Councils, heads of towns and villages in March 1998 our parties and NGOs act in coordination, aiming at toppling the ruling anti-people regime...» (Holos Ukrainy, January 30, 1998). However, in reality the agreement was not always followed. For instance, in January 1998 there was a conference of the Poltava regional branch of the Communist party. Leaders of the regional branch of the Socialist party were also invited to take part in the conference. However, during the even the Socialists accused their Communist hosts of violation of the coordinated action agreement in the election campaign, claiming that regardless of the agreement that each of the parties would nominate four candidates in constituency No. 8 of the Poltava region, the Communists nominated six. The Communists reacted by nominating the seventh candidate for the same constituency and asked their Socialist allies to leave the conference «Rehion, January 24, 1998). That was not a unique case. For instance, in one of the most contested constituencies (No. 221 of Kyiv), a member of the Communist party V.G. Sydorenko ran against a member of the Socialist party A.M. Novik; in constituency No. 220 of Kyiv then chief consultant of the Verkhovna Rada

Secretariat V.T. Yakovlev, nominated by the Socialist-Peasant block, opposed a Communist candidate M. Skrypala (Uriadovyi Kurrier, February 26, 1998).

Of course, this is already part of history, but there is no guarantee that the party leaders of today will not repeat the mistakes. Otherwise «no-competition» will prove to be a damaging bluff. The failure to recognize the danger backfired in 1998, when the right-wingers, the Rukh and the National Front, took part in the elections separately. The division of the right-wingers split up the right electorate and resulted in substantial decrease of the number of national democrats in the parliament.

Nowadays all political forces are trying to find their places in narrow niches of the left, centrist and right corners of the political spectrum. With just a few months left before the official start of the race in October, «inhabitants» of the «political hostel» still may undergo substantial transformations.

P.S. When this update was ready for sending to readers, we found out that the council of the National Salvation Forum reacted to the establishment of the NSF pre-election block by the decision to change its (i.e., the council's) name. According to member of the council Yuri Lutsenko, the likely new name would be «the Democratic Opposition Council» (www.korespondent.net, July 13, 2001). Moreover, the NSF will serve as a basis for the establishment of yet another center left opposition block led by Oleksandr Moroz. Yet, the NSF activists kept assuring everyone that the opposition blocks would not compete in the elections and would agree on candidates expected to run in majoritarian constituencies». According to one of the NSF leaders Volodymyr Chemerys, Yulia Tymoshenko could not be the united opposition's leader, as she represented only a part of it. After all, according to Chemerys, the ideal solution for Ukraine would be the establishment of a single opposition block that would result in the repetition of «the Serbian variant» in Ukraine (www.korespondent.net, July 13, 2001). Though, who of Ukrainian politicians would be prepared to give «his» or «her» leadership away?